# 3 The Politics of Bigfoot Porn, or the Relationship Between Sasquatch and the Far Right

*Jessica Landau*

In the 2018 race for Virginia's 5th Congressional District, which includes Charlottesville, in the election following the violence at the Unite the Right Rally, Democratic candidate Leslie Cockburn accused her Republican opponent, Denver Riggleman, of being a devotee of Bigfoot erotica. The pornography in question? A hand-drawn image Riggleman posted to his personal Instagram account. The picture depicts a male Bigfoot torso, cropped at the nose and knees, arms raised in a shrugging gesture, with a disproportionately long censor bar covering the genitalia.[1] The drawing was intended to attract attention to his in-progress book, *The Mating Habits of Bigfoot*, which was eventually published in 2020 under the revised title: *Bigfoot . . . It's Complicated*.[2] Riggleman, then a member of the far-right Freedom Caucus, was elected, in part, through his vocal support of freedom of expression and challenges to standard conceptions of expertise.

Riggleman is not the only Trump-era Republican with public ties to Bigfoot. Matthew Whitaker, Trump's acting attorney general in 2018–19, appointed after the resignation of Jeff Sessions, also has connections to Bigfoot and to truth claims of Bigfoot's existence. Before becoming the acting AG, Whitaker was paid to sit on the board of World Patent Marketing, a company which claimed to promote new products for large fees paid to them by inventors. In 2017, World Patent Marketing was shut down and ordered to pay $26 million for promoting fraudulent products and for defrauding potential inventors, including charging them for patents that were never filed or for products that could not legally be patented. One of the products they promoted was a Sasquatch doll, marketed on the now defunct squatchworld.com. Before the site was taken down, shoppers on squatchworld.com could browse Bigfoot dolls dressed up as different characters, such as a soccer player, ballerina, or astronaut. While Whitaker was on the board of World Patent Marketing, the company released a video advertising these dolls, making claims for Bigfoot's existence, including that DNA found in 2013 proves Bigfoot is real. The video also offers a one-million-dollar reward from World Patent Marketing for anyone who can provide "irrefutable proof that Bigfoot exists" (besides that DNA evidence they already have, I guess).[3]

To the disappointment of many readers, this chapter is not concerned with the debate as to whether Bigfoot is real, but rather how the history of Bigfoot visual culture makes sense for the recent and current mobilization of Bigfoot imagery by the far right. Bigfoot is not only illustrative of the anti-intellectual movement in the United States, popular among Riggleman's constituents and Donald Trump supporters, but I argue that Bigfoot has been, in part, formative to it. However, adding to the complexity of the interpretation of Bigfoot material culture, Riggleman's interest in Bigfoot comes primarily from a critique of the embrace of Bigfoot and Bigfoot culture by the far right. Riggleman's

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initial public display of Bigfoot imagery may have been a tongue-in-cheek way to connect with a far-right base in Virginia, but, as Riggleman moves closer to the center of the political spectrum and further from the Republican base, his critique and sometimes downright derision of Bigfoot and Bigfooters grows stronger and more public. Almost as a bellwether for Riggleman's political stance, the former congressman uses the cryptid as a means to attack Trumpism, the love of conspiracy, and a general distrust of expertise. In this way, this chapter tracks Bigfoot as both constitutive of Trumpist ideologies and a tool to dismantle them.

While almost every culture around the world has some sort of wild man mythology, Bigfoot is a 20th-century development. In the 1920s and 30s, an Indian agent writing about Coast Salish belief systems on the Chehalis Reservation in British Columbia created the word "Sasquatch," an anglicization of the Coast Salish Sḵsqəc, a mythological timber giant.[4] In 1957, the BC town of Harriman Hot Springs thrust the Sasquatch into the broader North American imaginary when they hosted a highly publicized Sasquatch hunt in celebration of the province's centennial. Monster hunters around the world were hooked, and loggers south of the Canadian border in the northern California town of Bluff Creek began seeing large tracks around their logging sights just one year later—leading to the cryptid's American nickname, Bigfoot.[5]

If Bigfoot was popular in the 1950s and early 60s, she became a household name after Roger Patterson and Bob Gimlin captured their infamous footage of a female Bigfoot, striding across a clearing in the woods near Bluff Creek, CA, in 1967. A silhouetted still from this film is what many of us think of when we imagine "Bigfoot." The United States at this time was primed for Bigfoot mythology, as the nation was entering a period of emerging environmental awareness. For example, the passage of the Wilderness Act of 1964 had many thinking about the need to preserve the wild spaces that helped define a rugged American identity. To be legally designated as wilderness, the Act defined lands "in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape, [wilderness] is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain."[6] Bigfoot, an unusually large creature requiring an exceptionally large amount of land to remain undiscovered, restored the belief that these "untrammeled" wilderness areas still exist. This celebration of wilderness as an unpeopled space also continues to erase the Indigenous peoples who have lived on and altered landscapes for generations and precipitates the continued removal of Indigenous peoples in order to designate lands as national parks, forests, or other publicly accessible wildernesses.

Bigfoot, as a yet-to-be-discovered creature hiding in untrammeled wilderness, plays into settler colonial discourses of discovery. The belief that Bigfoot exists maintains a frontier ethos; there are still unknown areas of the United States left to be explored. Following 19th-century historian Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 thesis, that Manifest Destiny and the American frontier were foundational for the construction of American identity, it is easy to see the connections between Bigfoot and a masculinist American identity connected to exploration and rugged individualism. Patterson and Gimlin were clearly aware of this connection as well and quite cleverly played into the visual discourse of frontierism in the marketing of their 1967 film.

The pair met on the rodeo circuit, and with Gimlin claiming Apache heritage, the two frequently played cowboy and Indian for the media—often citing Gimlin's Apache tracking skills as useful in the hunt for Bigfoot. This is clearly apparent in the inset photograph

of the cover of the February 1968 issue of the men's magazine *Argosy*, which had an exclusive feature on their film (Figure 3.1). In the photograph, the men are posed on horseback, in front of a mountain landscape. Patterson's cowboy persona is complete with a hat, jacket, and his relaxed posture, leaning just slightly back. Gimlin's version of Indianness is quite stereotypical, with a long black wig, headband, upright rifle in his right hand, and stiff posture.

*Figure 3.1* February 1968 cover of *Argosy* magazine. © Steeger Properties, LLC. All rights reserved.

The photograph is reminiscent of another iconic version of a settler-native pair: the very small figures from the center of Thomas Moran's 1872 painting *The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone*, owned by the U.S. Department of the Interior. Two figures can be made out in the bottom center of the frame, just at the tip of the inverted triangle made by the massive chasm of the Yellowstone canyon before them. A close inspection of the painting reveals these two figures are also riders, though they have recently dismounted from their horses. One of the figures, dressed as a settler or explorer (possibly meant to be Ferdinand Hayden, leader of the USGS Yellowstone expedition),[7] is looking outward towards the canyon, arms outstretched, while his partner, dressed as an Indian, is looking back towards the viewer of the image, holding a spear upright in his right hand—much like Gimlin's rifle. Moran's small figures ease the tension of Indian removal for a settler audience. Instead of an act of genocide, removal here is pictured as a simple transaction, the former "owner," the noble savage, connected to idyllic nature, is simply transferring power and ownership to the Euro-American settler, who is amazed by the beauty before him, arms spread in devotion. The figures are also situated temporally if we consider the direction of their gazes. The Indian is looking back towards the viewer—towards the past where he will be forever placed, while the explorer is looking out over the canyon, towards the future greatness America's awe-inspiring landscapes promise.[8]

While there are countless other examples of these kinds of settler/native or cowboy/Indian pairings, Moran's painting, as a foil for illustrating the place of this relationship in developing the American conception of wilderness, makes a particularly good comparison, or perhaps companion, to the *Argosy* photograph of Patterson and Gimlin. I cannot confirm nor deny Gimlin's Apache heritage; it is only mentioned in a handful of the texts written about him or their film. His actual ancestry is not necessarily at stake here (and, as Kim TallBear notes, there are many problematic implications of relying on things like genetic testing to define nativeness)[9] but what I am especially interested in is the way that Gimlin performs this heritage, as an explicit act of Playing Indian in relation to the Bigfoot myth.

According to Phillip J. Deloria, Playing Indian is a specifically American manifestation of primitivism, the origin of which he identifies at the birth of the American nation-state with the Boston Tea Party, where rebellious colonists donned pseudo-Mohawk costumes and dumped tea into the Boston Harbor. Playing Indian was a way to establish a distinctly American identity for colonists, and later Americans of European descent, separate from a British or European one. While the genocide of American Indians was necessary for the founding of the United States, American identity also relies on the appropriation of Indianness. According to Deloria, "Indians, it is clear, are not simply useful symbols of the love-hate ambivalence of civilization and savagery. Rather, the contradictions embedded in noble savagery have themselves been the precondition for the formation of American identities."[10] Bigfoot's origins in native epistemologies are not just a point believers use as evidence of its existence, but the co-optation of Native mythology becomes one of the cryptid's particularities that make it especially appealing to the far right. The search for Bigfoot itself provides believers the opportunity to Play Indian and construct their own rugged American identity while simultaneously erasing Native peoples. In fact, Playing Indian can be seen in other examples of the visual culture of Trumpism, such as the January 6 Shaman, where nativeness often becomes nativism.

In the *Argosy* photograph, Patterson and Gimlin are not only paired as the quintessential cowboy and Indian, gazing out across a Western wilderness, but, like the coupling

in Moran's painting, the direction of their gaze matters. In an analysis of 19th-century paintings of westward expansion, art historian Roger Cushing Aikin identified that most, if aligned with a compass rose, depict movement from the east (right) to the west (left) of the picture plane.[11] Following Aikin's logic, if we apply cardinal directions to the frame of the *Argosy* photograph, with north aligning with the top edge, then Patterson and Gimlin are looking eastwards. In terms of a narrative of westward progress, which associates movement west with the spread of civilization and in some respects the future, then Patterson and Gimlin, sitting astride horses in a West that is no longer wild, but quickly urbanizing, are looking east, back in time towards a past for which they are nostalgic. Bigfoot preserves the wildness men like Patterson and Gimlin longed for, the wildness they envisioned existed in the American west of the imaginary.[12] Gimlin's Indian Play strongly taps into that nostalgia, connecting these men to the primitive pasts and simpler times they mourn for in an increasingly globalizing world.

Riggleman's Bigfoot, displayed with a large censor bar across his genitals, could be interpreted as a projection of exactly that kind of lamentation of the loss of masculinity. This Bigfoot appears incredibly man-like, albeit covered in hair, with his six-pack and bulging pectoral muscles. Adding in the incredible length of Riggleman's censor bar, this Bigfoot is a physical manifestation of masculinity: muscular, well endowed, and powerful.[13] This is highlighted by the cropping chosen by Riggleman, which cuts off most of Bigfoot's face; we are meant to focus on his muscular torso and exaggerated genitals. He is perhaps a stand-in for men like Riggleman (he named his distillery "Silverback" in reference to mature, male gorillas), who feel left behind or impotent in a world of increasing equity and diversity. In some ways, the hunt for Bigfoot is, in part, a demonstration of this masculinity as it works to "ease these anxieties by affirming the culture of character, the importance of work, skill, and an old-fashioned masculinity."[14] However, Riggleman may be in on this critique, and in a self-deprecating foreword to his book, *Bigfoot . . . It's Complicated*, he notes that since "Bigfoot Erotica is part of the conversation (Thank you, congressional opponent)," he wants "to apologize to all Bigfoot believers who are quite sure that Bigfoot is an ape. He isn't. Apes have very small genitalia. Bigfoot is a man, baby. Or something close to a man."[15]

At the same time, however, the discourse surrounding Bigfoot often takes on racialized resonance, a fact Riggleman often ignores, yet something that was highlighted by Cockburn's original tweet. In her retweet of his Instagram post, she wrote, "My opponent Denver Riggleman, running mate of Corey Stewart, was caught on camera campaigning with a White supremacist. Now he has been exposed as a devotee of Bigfoot erotica. This is not what we need on Capitol Hill."[16] While many of Cockburn's supporters called her out for shaming Riggleman's kinks or even for critiquing a belief in Bigfoot, others did not understand the connection between Bigfoot and White supremacy that she was (perhaps unknowingly) hinting at. Riggleman's proposed book title, *The Mating Habits of Bigfoot and Why Women Want Him*, warns that women may want Bigfoot instead of their human mates; Riggleman even writes about his wife musing about Sasquatch penis size.[17] The sexualized Bigfoot hints at the long history of the stereotype of the oversexed Black man for whom White women were supposedly easy prey. Other large apes have also stepped into this problematic role, for example the giantest of giant apes, King Kong, who terrorized New York by kidnapping the pretty blonde.[18] This, of course, comes from the equally long history of racist depictions of Black people as simian or even as a missing link between great apes and humans.

Many Bigfooters believe that the cryptid is either a surviving prehistoric giant ape, the *Gigantopithecus blacki*, or some kind of unknown missing link, a humanoid ancestor

who survived extinction. As American and European scientists learned more about gorillas in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many believed that the offspring between a gorilla and an African woman would be the missing link—subscribing to Social Darwinist ideas that relied on racist pseudoscience to support White supremacy.[19] The focus on the sexuality of Bigfoot coupled with the theory that Bigfoot may be a missing link continues this trope. Like the nearly human qualities of other ape monsters such as King Kong, positioning Bigfoot as a missing link can help justify eugenicist pseudoscience that stirs fears of miscegenation and promotes racism.

Cockburn's tweet recalls these histories, though interestingly, one of the main criticisms of it was that she equated something as serious as White supremacy with something as silly as Bigfoot, her critics unaware of the cultural connections between the two. Her accusations of Riggleman's ties to White supremacy were unfounded, however. The photograph she mentioned was simply a shot of one of Riggleman's rallies in which he was caught in the same frame as an audience member who was a known White supremacist. According to Riggleman's team, this man was an uninvited guest who simply showed up and the two have never met.[20] Riggleman, unlike Trump and other Trumpist Republicans of the time, regularly repudiates White supremacy.

Riggleman does not address these issues of race and settler colonialism in any of his writings, interviews, or podcast episodes on Bigfoot. Instead, his focus on Bigfoot is on its functioning as a conspiracy theory—Bigfoot is a "political allegory," according to Riggleman.[21] For him, the most politically relevant element of Bigfoot culture is its rejection of accepted scientific expertise and embrace of amateur knowledge production. He sees those who traffic in Bigfoot material culture as charlatans or snake oil salesmen. In his current podcast, *The Mighty Peculiar*, Riggleman and friends discuss the histories of cryptids, aliens, ghosts, and other myths in a way that relates them directly to contemporary political conspiracy theories such as QAnon and Stop the Steal. In one episode about Bigfoot, Riggleman claims that it is the people "who do their own research" who scare him the most because of their distrust of expertise and willingness to fall victim to their own confirmation bias.[22] Bigfooting is an amateur's profession. While there are a handful of people who truly make a living hunting for the beast (or guiding others to do so), these individuals (with very few exceptions, like the anthropologist Grover Krantz) are not accredited by standard institutions or educations. This often breeds a distrust of the academy and traditional science in Bigfoot research[23]—the kind of distrust and disregard for expertise that is common among conspiracy theorists on the far right.

The Trumpist GOP leaves little room for moderates like Riggleman. He has, in fact, left the Republican Party after being censured for officiating a same sex wedding and noting that his time as a member of the Freedom Caucus revealed the ways in which belief in conspiracy has invaded Republican thinking. After leaving office he served as a technical adviser to the January 6 Committee. This does not mean that he has become a liberal. For Riggleman, a man invested in family values, one of the most shocking things about hunting for Bigfoot is that expeditions support their own hook-up culture (a "pearl clutching" on his part that makes the Bigfoot erotica accusation even funnier, perhaps). While Riggleman is no longer a Republican, he was never a Trump Republican. So, what does this mean for his investment in Bigfoot?

In many ways, I think, Riggleman's early social media posts about Bigfoot were a means to poke fun at conspiracy theorists without completely alienating his conservative base. Eventually, as he became more and more disillusioned with the GOP, Riggleman's use of

Bigfoot became more overt, truly functioning as political allegory. In his podcast and book, any time he says Bigfoot, you could simply substitute QAnon, Stop the Steal, or the conspiracy du jour. As Riggleman tells us, Bigfoot is complicated. Its history is one of co-optation of Native culture, racist stereotyping, and a dangerous distrust in expertise. Bigfoot is indicative of the way that conspiracy theories, especially those grounded in White supremacist ideas, have become mainstream. While not the potential monster ape lurking in the woods, this is something that should scare us. I'll give Riggleman the last word on this:

> I've peered into the glowing eyes of the most convicted true believers, those desperate souls who believe in Bigfoot. I have witnessed the same unearthly glow in the eyes of anarcho-marxist political activists and QAnon conspiracy theorists. The glow frightens me. . . . The glow means these people will fight for the irrational and against the rational, no matter the stakes.[24]

## Notes

1. I was unable to get in touch with Riggleman to secure reproduction rights for the image, but readers will be pleased to know it is easily found through a simple internet search. An example can be found at Bob Collins, "'Bigfoot Erotica' Stalks a Congressional Race," *MPR News*, July 31, 2018, www.mprnews.org/story/2018/07/31/bigfoot-erotica-stalks-a-congressional-race.
2. Denver Riggleman, *Bigfoot . . . It's Complicated* (Parker, CO: Outskirts Press, 2020).
3. World Patent Marketing, "Squatch World—The Search for Bigfoot Continues," *Vimeo*, August 22, 2016, https://vimeo.com/179827339.
4. Wayne Suttles, "On the Cultural Track of the Sasquatch," *Coast Salish Essays* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987), 74.
5. For a more detailed account of Bigfoot history, see Joshua Blu Buhs, *Bigfoot: The Life and Times of a Legend* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), or Daniel Loxton and Donald R. Prothero, "Bigfoot: The Sasquatch," in *Abominable Science!* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 29–71, among others.
6. Wilderness Act, Section 2 (c), Public Law 88–577 (16 U.S.C. 1131–1136), 88th Congress, Second Session, September 3, 1964.
7. Angela L. Miller, "The Fate of Wilderness in American Landscape Art," in *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History*, ed. Alan C. Braddock and Christoph Irmscher (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009), 103.
8. Miller, 103.
9. Kim TallBear, *Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).
10. Phillip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 4.
11. Roger Cushing Aikin, "Paintings of Manifest Destiny: Mapping the Nation," *American Art* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 2000): 78–89.
12. Buhs, 159.
13. In a strange link to Riggleman's masculinist portrayal of a well-endowed Bigfoot, another one of the inventions which Whitaker personally promoted, in addition to the Sasquatch world dolls, was the "masculine toilet," which was a toilet with a deeper bowl for men with larger than average penis sizes. While of course not directly connected to Sasquatch in any way, the two products demonstrate the need for an outward projection of a rugged and hypermasculine masculinity, the idea being that those of us who hunt Bigfoot probably also need extra deep toilets.
14. Buhs, 160.
15. Riggleman, 1.
16. Leslie Cockburn, @LeslieCockburn, Twitter, July 29, 2018.
17. Riggleman, 18.
18. Rhona J. Berenstein, "White Heroines and Hearts of Darkness: Race, Gender, and Disguise in 1930s Jungle Films," *Film History* 6, no. 3 (Autumn 1994): 314–39.

19. Jeannette Eileen Jones, "'Gorilla Trails in Paradise': Carl Akeley, Mary Bradley, and the American Search for the Missing Link," *The Journal of American Culture* 29, no. 3, (September 2006): 322.
20. Eric Killelea, "Denver Riggleman Claims That, No, He Does Not Believe in Bigfoot," *Rolling Stone*, July 31, 2018, www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/denver-riggleman-claims-that-no-he-does-not-believe-in-bigfoot-705351/?sub_action=logged_in.
21. Quoted in Killelea.
22. Denver Riggleman, "An Alien, a Bigfoot and a Ghost Walk into a Bar," *The Mighty Peculiar*, podcast episode, released September 6, 2023.
23. Brian Regal, "Amateur versus Professional: The Search for Bigfoot," *Endeavour* 32, no. 2 (June 2008): 53–7.
24. Riggleman, 174.

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